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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the efforts of educators in communities nationwide to engage the public in teaching and learning activities, specifically in support of teacher professional development. Though there is no single model for positive public engagement, there are general principles, which include: finding an entry point (e.g., finding key constituencies which comprise the public and noting educational issues deemed important by each constituency); crafting a shared vision (e.g., ensuring a common understanding of what constitutes good professional development and determining who is involved in determining what, when, where, and how teachers learn); promoting effective communication (e.g., improving existing forums and vehicles for educators and community members to discuss educational issues and measuring the effectiveness of the communications); establishing a new model of interaction (e.g., making schools open and welcoming to the community as active participants and giving parents and community members meaningful opportunities to shape the instructional and programmatic agenda for the school/district); and planning ahead to show results (e.g., collecting data demonstrating a connection between professional development and student achievement and sharing data with parents and community members). (SM)

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ENGAGING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATION

FALL 2000

No. 3

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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THE NEA FOUNDATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT of EDUCATION
Establishing High-Quality Professional Development

Engaging Public Support for Teachers' Professional Development

The Case for Public Engagement

According to recent research, schools should be places where teachers learn as well as teach.[1] To improve student learning, we should improve teaching. To improve teaching, teachers must engage in learning continuously as an integral part of their job. Teacher learning cannot be relegated to special occasions, nor can the subject of that learning be divorced from the immediate learning needs of students.

Maureen Rabinovitz, a parent leader in Falls Church, Virginia, reasons that "teachers feed students, provide nourishment. If you have a starving teacher, how can she [or he] be nourishing her [or his] students?" In NFIE's 1996 study *Teachers Take Charge of Their Learning*, teachers reported that ongoing, job-embedded, collegial professional development provides that nourishment. Schools where teachers focus on student work, interact with colleagues to plan how to improve their teaching, and continuously bring new skills and knowledge to bear on their practice are also schools that produce the best results for children.

To make this level of achievement a reality in every school, the public first must be convinced that schools should be places where teachers as well as children learn. Then, they must move beyond merely embracing the idea to engaging in making it possible. To become engaged, the public needs to personally *experience* this learning.

[1] See, for example, Linda Darling-Hammond and Deborah Loewenberg Ball, *Teaching for High Standards: What Policymakers Need to Know and Be Able to Do*, Consortium for Policy Research in Education (1998); also Linda Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (January 2000).

About The NEA Foundation for the Improvement of Education (NFIE)

The NEA Foundation awards grants to public school educators who propose promising ideas that inspire students to learn and that improve the quality of teaching. NFIE supports their work, studies the results, and disseminates the findings. In partnership with the National Education Association (NEA) and America's public educators, the foundation strives to move these grassroots innovations to practical, widespread application. NFIE invests in education professionals, enabling them to acquire new knowledge and skills that contribute to student success.

THE NEA FOUNDATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT of EDUCATION

Formerly named the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, in 2000 NFIE became The NEA Foundation for the Improvement of Education. This change more clearly reflects NFIE's proud and close association with the NEA, which created the foundation in 1969. The foundation's mission remains unaltered: to empower public education employees to innovate, take risks, and become agents for change to improve teaching and learning in our society.

This paper proposes strategies for engaging the public in support of teachers' professional development. It outlines many of the issues that teacher leaders, building administrators, district staff, and other education advocates should consider in preparing for a targeted public engagement effort. The paper is based on the proceedings of NFIE's spring 2000 Public Engagement Symposium. One of a series, the symposium formed an important part of *A Change of Course*, NFIE's effort to improve the quality and availability of professional development for public school teachers nationwide.

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Public engagement is not a short-term project or program, but rather a long-term partnership between professional educators and the public to achieve the common goal of success for all students. It is not about "rubber-stamp participation," or, as one district administrator puts it, "inviting people to the table but never passing the food." It incorporates elements of public relations, family involvement strategies, and school-community partnerships. Public engagement involves business leaders, senior citizens, legislators, university faculty, leaders of cultural organizations—people who are not traditionally considered part of the school community, but who have a voice in the political process surrounding public education.

This paper describes the efforts of educators in communities across the country to engage the public in teaching and learning activities, specifically in support of teacher professional development. As these examples demonstrate, there is no single model for positive public engagement, only general principles: finding an appropriate "entry point"; crafting a shared vision; promoting effective communication; establishing a new model of interaction between educators and the public; and planning ahead to show results. These principles may be useful to teacher leaders, building administrators, and others interested in helping students achieve.

Finding an Entry Point

In Stillwater, Oklahoma, a diverse partnership—including the school district, Stillwater Education Association, Oklahoma Education Association, Chamber of Commerce, League of Women Voters, PTA Council, and the Colleges of Education and Arts and Sciences at Oklahoma State University—has been working for the past three years to gain public support for rigorous teacher learning. The group has laid a solid foundation for active public involvement in the schools, and achieved widespread awareness of teachers' need for professional growth opportunities.

A 1996 survey of Stillwater teachers demonstrated widespread desire for more time for collaborative planning and assessment of student work. However, because the community was generally satisfied with the public schools, says assistant superintendent Dr. Diana Leggett, the need to change and grow had to come from internal motivation rather than external pressures. She predicted that making changes to the school schedule for the purpose of adding more professional development time would not be possible without broad community support.

One of the focal activities of the partnership was a series of "study circles," which brought educators and community representatives together to deliberate issues of public concern. Supported by trained facilitators, detailed ground rules, and common discussion materials, participants shared their perspectives and developed plans for action. The conversation began with general questions such as "What do we want our graduates to know and be able to do?" and "What challenges does our district face in helping our students meet these standards?" These were followed by focus groups dealing specifically with the issue of gaining more time for teacher professional development.

David Smith, the executive director of public engagement and advocacy for the Kansas City, Missouri School District, emphasizes the need to honor the public's opinions and values in any attempt to get them involved in the schools. "People will not change their actions because of what I think or say or what I believe," he notes, "unless it connects powerfully to their own situations. The

> "People will not change their actions because of what I think or say or what I believe, unless it connects powerfully to their own situations."
> —*David Smith* Kansas City, Missouri School District

individual makes the decision about how to become involved." Find out what people care deeply about, Mr. Smith suggests. "Start with that. Then move on to the tougher issues, like improved teaching and learning and professional development." Thus, the first step toward engaging the public around teacher professional development is to identify the right "entry point."

In Tacoma, Washington, an entry point came in the form of parent-teacher conferences centered on collaborative planning for student success. The Tacoma Education Association and the Tacoma Public Schools jointly created the "partnership conferencing" model, in which teachers set quarterly academic goals with parents and students; engage in active listening (a process enabling parents to have equal input in devising instructional strategies for their children); involve parents in students' academic progress; and celebrate student growth at the end of each school year.

"We started out with relationship building. We took a basic communication strategy—i.e., talking with parents—and it has become a transformative process for schools," says Gayle Nakayama, Tacoma Education Association treasurer and reading specialist at Larchmont Elementary School. Crucial to the model's successful implementation was the training teachers received in facilitation and listening skills. Ms. Nakayama recalls that parents "were leaving conferences feeling that they didn't have a chance to say what they wanted to say. Under our new model, parents feel valued, and teachers feel that they aren't carrying the entire burden of educating students." In the current high-stakes environment, this kind of cooperation and mutual respect is indispensable.

As teachers and parents worked together to plan student learning goals, it became clear that teachers themselves might need additional skills and knowledge to meet the new district content standards. Ms. Nakayama feels that the partnership conferencing experience gave professional development "a different face." It demonstrated that professional development is not limited to classes or workshops, but can encompass other collegial and personal growth experiences that change the way teachers work with their students and with the public.

Building on the successful partnership conferencing model, the union and school district are now collaborating on Project Quality, a new initiative to develop standards for teaching in the Tacoma Public Schools. These standards will eventually be the basis for the district's recruitment, mentoring, evaluation, and professional development systems.

Community members have been involved in Project Quality through participation in frequent focus groups and meetings, and their beliefs about what constitutes quality teaching and learning are evident in the draft standards. One of the new teaching standards reads, in part:

> Accomplished teaching sets high expectations for learning and respects student differences. Students are most successful when teachers act on the belief that they have the responsibility to engage and challenge all students…Teachers also foster student respect for individual, cultural, religious and racial differences. [An accomplished teacher] selects and tailors curricular materials and instruction to a diverse student population. (*Draft*, February 2, 2000)

This standard reflects input not only from Tacoma teachers, but also from members of the Asian Alliance, the Black Collective, and other local cultural organizations who expressed their desire for explicit attention to diversity as it affects teaching and learning.

Crafting a Shared Vision

As the partners in Stillwater discovered, professional development is a difficult topic to broach. Non-educators may find it difficult to visualize what school-based, continuous teacher learning might look like. They may also take for granted opportunities to continuously update one's skills and knowledge as part of one's daily work.

For many teachers, the mere terms "professional development" and "staff development" carry a lot of baggage. Old notions of professional development—"sit and get" or "drive-by" workshops, being "talked at"—still predominate. This poses a challenge in engaging public support, for teachers may be spreading their negative impressions in even the most casual interactions with neighbors and friends. "Those grocery store conversations by teachers who complain about professional development are killers," notes Kathy Orlando, a parent and school board member in Tacoma.

Support for professional development among both teachers and the public begins with crafting a jointly held vision for high-quality professional development. Drawing directly on teachers' best experiences, NFIE defines high-quality professional development as that which:

- Has the goal of improving student learning at the heart of every school endeavor
- Helps teachers and other school staff meet the needs of students who learn in different ways and who come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds
- Provides adequate time for inquiry, reflection, and mentoring and is an important part of the normal working day of all public school educators
- Is rigorous, sustained, and adequate to the long-term change of practice
- Is directed toward teachers' intellectual development and leadership
- Fosters a deepening of subject-matter knowledge, a greater understanding of learning, and a greater appreciation of students' needs
- Is designed and directed by teachers, incorporates the best principles of adult learning, and involves shared decisions to improve the school
- Balances individual priorities with school and district needs and advances the profession as a whole
- Makes best use of new technologies
- Is site-based and supportive of a clearly articulated vision for students.

Cathaleen Hampton, a technology specialist and mentor at Alvarado Elementary School in Union City, California, notes that teachers are rarely asked for their opinion on what professional development they would find useful. She suggests that the best approach is "to start with the kids and see what they need, and then the teacher figures out what [he or she] needs to help those kids." Also important is a principal who serves as a role model by, for example, consistently allocating

staff meetings to discussions of teaching and learning issues, and participating in study groups and other collegial learning activities with teachers in order to understand how best to provide the needed support.

Building a common understanding within the profession and with the public of what constitutes good professional development, and then developing and implementing systems that are based on that vision, is long-term work that follows a different process in every locality. Teachers, administrators, union leaders, parents, business leaders, policymakers, and students must collaborate to establish this shared vision for teacher learning.

Promoting Effective Communication

Collaborative vision-building, whether around professional development or any other topic, requires purposeful and structured conversations among stakeholders. Many successful public engagement efforts, as in Stillwater, open with a conversation that brings together representatives from all sectors of the community to discuss general education issues. There are a variety of proven models for such conversations, including those offered by the Study Circle Resource Center, the League of Women Voters, Public Agenda, and the Kettering Foundation.

> Purposeful and structured conversation among stakeholders is the first step in collaborative vision-building.

Brenda Bose of the Stillwater League of Women Voters suggests the use of ground rules emphasizing listening, civility, and respect for all points of view. Important in the success of the Stillwater study circles was the sterling reputation of the League of Women Voters, the conveners and facilitators, for neutrality and objectivity. The League was not seen to have an "ax to grind" in terms of gaining more money or time for teachers. Holding the meetings in various locations throughout the community rather than at school sites also served to put participants at ease and encouraged them to speak freely.

Ten Tips for Working with the Local Press

from Ann Bradley of Education Week

- Be proactive. Don't wait to contact a reporter until you have a story to suggest. Instead, arrange a meeting, and focus on building an ongoing relationship.
- Be prompt when reporters are on deadline and contact you for information.
- Be honest when you can't help.
- Meet with the editorial board of your local paper(s), in addition to reporters.
- Do your homework. Read the local paper(s) and watch local news broadcasts regularly to get a sense of the topics they cover and their perspective.
- Stay abreast of education issues on the national level and try to connect what you are doing locally to those larger issues.
- Know where your stories are and identify potential sources. The more information you can provide to a reporter, the better.
- If you are trying to pitch a story, focus on concrete results or events; don't talk about huge social problems.
- Don't try to force your agenda on the reporter or editor; be forthright, present them with the information, and make yourself available for follow-up if they have questions.
- Don't ignore problems that may exist, but avoid public mud-slinging (e.g., between a union and a district administration). This sort of conflict generally results in negative coverage.

Educators have a variety of other communications vehicles at their disposal such as school open houses, district newsletters, websites, or brochures. While developing effective media coverage (see "Ten Tips for Working with the Local Press") can be a useful part of a public engagement effort, Ann Bradley, associate editor at *Education Week*, suggests a few principles that hold true for all of these vehicles:

- Concentrate on building relationships, first and foremost.
- Share interesting stories (and pictures and student work) showing what is happening with children and teachers in the classroom.
- Provide information and let your audience react to it.
- Then connect their concerns to professional development.

Andy Plattner of A-Plus Communications in Arlington, Virginia, emphasizes the importance of communicating what you want your audience to *do*, as opposed to what you want them to *know*. If communications are treated as a one-way transmission of information from the school to the public, then other interactions between the schools and the public are likely to remain one-way as well. Effective communications rely on a model of continuous feedback, wherein audiences are encouraged to react to information they receive, and the author (e.g., the school or district) visibly incorporates that response into the next communication or action. This difference in approach might be illustrated as follows:

process	Monologue	Dialogue	Engagement
	One-way talking or "informing," with no suggested action on the part of the audience	*Two-way communication, inviting initial participation by the audience*	*Two-way communication, incorporating results from previous interactions, and suggesting a new course of action*
message	"Our teachers need more professional development."	"Join us for a meeting to discuss how teacher learning affects student learning, and explore options for our teachers to update their skills and knowledge."	"Please come to a follow-up forum to examine the draft plan for district professional development for next year, and talk about strategies for the upcoming referendum on changing the elementary school calendar."

Establishing a New Model of Interaction

Moving from "talking the talk" to "walking the walk" is the true test of public engagement. "Study circles open up a whole new ball game, because now we have potential for the business community, senior citizens, and others to actually have input in decision making," says Brenda Bose of the Stillwater League of Women Voters. Rather than being informed after the fact of efforts to improve or enhance local schools, the public has a chance to set the agenda in cooperation with educators. This makes all the difference in their willingness to *act* on that agenda.

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Two initiatives proposed by focus group participants in Stillwater were a "technology substitute" program, in which parents, university faculty, para-educators, and others facilitate technology-based learning sessions to free teachers for collegial work, and the creation of a legislative group to keep local policymakers informed of new trends in the schools and to advocate at the state level for more funding and time for professional development. These and other ideas will be implemented over the next several years.

In the meantime, the partners agree that there has been a perceptible shift in public attitudes. "People came in saying teachers get too much money and too much time," says Ms. Bose, "and now they understand the need for more money and time." District professional development offerings currently include access to a three-year, state-funded institute on inquiry science; an institute on peer coaching and mentoring; and a half-day per month for grade-level planning at the elementary and middle schools.

When the group eventually tackles the trickier issue of restructuring the school calendar to allow time for professional development during the normal work week, Dr. Leggett anticipates that "even if we have complaints, we will have other people from the community—not teachers, not administrators—who will stand up and say, 'Teachers need this. They *must* have this for our schools to be what we want them to be.'" While it is necessary for teachers to have a strong voice in the process of restructuring, it is not sufficient. The argument will be much more powerful if others add their voices to the choir.

When parents and community members learn along with teachers, they become advocates for professional development. True engagement brings these people into settings where they, along with educators, can focus on student work:

- Fairfax County, Virginia: Designated "parent liaisons" are responsible for staying informed of, and connecting teachers to, district-wide resources and initiatives. For example, when a teacher is dealing with many different home languages among his or her students, the parent liaison works with the district language office, the teachers, and students to facilitate communication and cultural understanding.

- Falls Church, Virginia: Parents at Bailey's Elementary School participate in "Teacher Reader Groups," ongoing study groups around selected instructional issues.

- Ypsilanti, Michigan: A group of teachers, parents, business leaders, community leaders, and administrators comes together in a roundtable for two hours each month to discuss a variety of teaching and learning issues, including professional development. The staff at one school talked extensively with parents about upcoming changes to the instructional program before publicizing its planned professional development sessions, which were open to the public. Teachers successfully bargained for ten and a half days of professional development per year to be included in their contract.

- Union City, California: School leaders at Alvarado Elementary School collaborated with parents and other community members in the development of a strategic technology plan. The school then arranged for a late start every Wednesday to be devoted to technology training for faculty. When the late-start was suspended because of a funding shortfall, parents protested.

- McKinney, Texas: District administrators initiated a study group with parents and school faculty on middle-level education, addressing the differences

between middle and junior high schools and the implications for instruction. Parents independently raised the issue of professional development.

- Washington State: Legislators were invited to take sample tenth-grade student assessments. After seeing what was involved in the tests, the legislators supported a measure to add three professional development days to the school calendar.
- Douglas County, Colorado: "Principal for a Day" and "Teacher for a Day" programs allow community members to come into a school and job-shadow an educator.
- Stillwater, Oklahoma: A district program teams university professors and classroom teachers to free teachers for site-based collegial work such as grade-level planning.

As illustrated by these examples, public engagement implies bringing the public into the very heart of good professional development and of good schooling—a focus on student work.

Planning Ahead to Show Results

In order to maintain public interest and involvement in professional development over the long term, educators need to demonstrate that ongoing teacher learning produces results for students. In Stillwater, local legislators are invited to visit classes where innovative science instruction is being practiced and where student learning is improving as a result of the professional development. Elsewhere, in a program called Changing Education through the Arts (CETA), faculty at eight schools in the Washington, D.C., area are partnering with the Kennedy Center to create a program of professional development in drama, music, visual arts, and dance. As part of CETA, participatory workshops are offered to interested parents so they can witness the effectiveness of arts integration and understand the importance of including the arts in their children's education. By "going behind the scenes" to see what was involved in developing and implementing specific instructional activities, parents are more readily able to make the connection between teacher and student learning.

These sorts of qualitative indicators of the benefits of teacher learning can be balanced by quantitative data from indicators of student academic performance. A growing body of research links professional development and student achievement. For example, a 1999 study by Michigan State University professor Mary Kennedy found that in math and science education, professional development that focused on deep content and on how students actually learn the particular subject matter produced measurable student benefits.[2] University of Michigan faculty members David Cohen and Heather Hill reached a similar conclusion in examining the effects of California's mathematics reform on teaching practice and student performance, especially on policies influencing how and what teachers learned.[3]

Bob Keeble, president of the Hayward (California) Education Association, encourages the use of teacher professional development and student learning data with the public. "Tell parents: 'We're weak in decimals. And this is what we are going to do. We're weak in writing, and so we're going to work on that and we'll work toward better results.' Share specific challenges and plans for addressing them with the parents. Then follow up by sharing the results." Establishing an expectation among

[2] Mary M. Kennedy, "Form and Substance in Mathematics and Science Professional Development," *NISE Brief* (November 1999).
[3] David K. Cohen and Heather C. Hill, *Instructional Policy and Classroom Performance: The Mathematics Reform in California*, Consortium for Policy Research in Education (1998).

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parents and other community members that they should and will have access to this kind of information on a regular basis will help ensure that processes of data collection and analysis become institutionalized, a regular part of the school's work.

In one useful approach, the Dallas Independent School District has established Campus Instructional Leadership Teams comprising both teachers and administrators who examine student performance and contextual data. Their analysis is followed by grade-level meetings with teachers to determine what adjustments to instruction are needed to improve student results.

> Schools and districts should regularly report to the public on data that indicate student learning needs, together with plans for teacher learning that addresses those needs.

Because the push for accountability originates, to a large extent, outside the schools, strategies for directly involving the public in assessment and data analysis should also be considered. At some schools in Dallas, parents serve on the Campus Instructional Leadership Teams. At others, recommendations of the teams—including those regarding professional development—are reviewed by the School-Centered Education Council, which includes equal numbers of school and community representatives.

Teachers and administrators at the ACT Academy in McKinney, Texas, are going one step further in demonstrating the link between their learning and student performance. ACT is an "experimental" school offering thirty-one days of professional development to its teachers every year. Thus it was not surprising when a new superintendent asked for concrete results. Academy director Susan Germann says that the idea of student portfolios inspired a solution.

At the ACT Academy, student needs are the key criteria for planning teachers' professional learning. In carrying out their individual professional development plans, teachers are also required to engage in some form of collegial learning with another district teacher. The plans, details of their implementation, and assessment of the eventual impact will all be assembled in an electronic portfolio accessible to parents and others in the community as a concrete demonstration of how educators are leveraging their own learning to contribute to student success.

Keeping Your Eye on the Goal

If capturing and sustaining public support for professional development seems a daunting task, teachers can ask others to join with them, as suggested by Clifford Kusaba, president of the Teachers Association of Long Beach in California: "Picture a child. Ask yourself, what future do you want for that child? Then imagine how public education can help achieve that future, and what you can do in the effort." At a basic level, this is everyone's "entry point" into public discussions about the quality of teaching and learning in America's schools and the foundation for crafting a shared vision for teacher learning.

Parents, business leaders, and community representatives are teachers' natural allies in any effort to help students achieve high standards. Giving them opportunities to be a positive force for change requires patience, stamina, and communications strategies built around a partnership of equals.

Lasting improvements in teachers' professional development—with all the many rewards for student achievement—can be achieved when the barriers between schools and the communities they serve cease to exist. When the job of teaching, in its vast complexity, is directly experienced by education's diverse public, support for ongoing, high-quality professional development will become central to the mission of schools and school districts.

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